

**SEPTEMBER 22, 2003 SCHAKOWSKY, COLLEAGUES EXPRESS CONCERN FOR SAFETY OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS FOLLOWING SPEECH BY COLOMBIAN PRESIDENT URIBE**

**CALL ON SECRETARY POWELL TO PUBLICLY  
DISSOCIATE THE US FROM URIBE'S COMMENTS  
AND PRESSURE HIM TO PROTECT HUMAN**

**RIGHTS IN COLOMBIA** WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Chief Deputy Whip, today called on Secretary of State Colin Powell *"to make a strong public statement dissociating the United States from President Uribe's remarks."*

□ □ President Uribe, during a speech on September 8th before assembled armed forces' leadership, accused members of the human rights community in Colombia of acting in the service of terrorism, and added that some human rights defenders were *"spokespeople for terrorists" and called others "traffickers for human rights."*

In a letter organized by Schakowsky, and signed by 18 members of Congress, the members urged Secretary Powell to call on President Uribe *"to protect, by his words and by his actions, human rights defenders and the broader nongovernmental community in Colombia."*

□ Below is the full text of the letter to Secretary Powell:

*September 22, 2003*

**Secretary Colin L. Powell  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520**

**Dear Secretary Powell:**

████████████████████ **During your trip to Bogotá, Colombia last year, you remarked upon the Colombian government's national security strategy as a "comprehensive plan to build a healthy democracy." We strongly concur with the goal of fostering a "healthy democracy" in Colombia today. We were alarmed, however, by a recent speech by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe which would weaken, not strengthen, his country's democratic values.**

████████████████████ **Speaking on September 8th before the assembled armed forces' leadership at the inauguration ceremony for the new head of the air force, President Uribe devoted a major portion of his address to accusing members of the human rights community in Colombia of acting in the service of terrorism. He suggested that some human rights defenders were "spokespeople for terrorists" and called others "traffickers for human rights." He called upon these human rights defenders to "take off their masks" and end "this cowardice of hiding their ideas behind human rights." President Uribe pointedly did not mention specific human rights groups and also referred generally to "NGOs"; thus, his remarks put at risk the entire community of human rights, humanitarian and service organizations in Colombia.**

████████████████████ **Ties between some members of the military and paramilitary forces have been extensively documented by the State Department and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bogotá, as well as by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Moreover, paramilitary forces have specifically targeted, threatened and killed human rights defenders and community and labor union activists. Thus, this broad accusation associating human rights defenders with terrorists before the assembled armed forces' leadership can be read as an endorsement of the view that human rights defenders are entitled to less protection from paramilitary aggression-- and could be heard by some as a green light for collaboration with paramilitary abuses.**

████████████████████ **Mr. Uribe's remarks cast a chill over the already tense climate for human rights defenders in Colombia. Many already are living in exile; others continue to carry out their critical work despite regular threats, in some cases with bodyguards, metal detectors and other protective measures the United States has helped to finance. These activists merit and need protection from the government; they do not deserve to be placed in further peril.**

████████████████████ **We urge you to make a strong public statement dissociating the United States from President Uribe's remarks, indicating strong US concern with these statements, and asking him to protect, by his words and by his actions, human rights defenders and the broader nongovernmental community in Colombia.**

████████████████████ **As we all know, a "healthy democracy" includes civil society, dissent and public debate.**